Bella Coola Indians - Chapter IV

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~~scoop~~

to the expenses of his funeral. This would be optional,
~~may represent a Kimsquit debt, one Tsimshian friend helping another,~~ as the essence of a

non-ceremonial present is that its repayment concerns the donor and recipient alone, without effect on the status of either in the community. In this instance, if the old man had died soon after his son, his debts would not have been paid, since there were no immediate surviving relatives. Sons or other near relatives always settle the debts of dead parents, as a matter of family pride, but it is considered most improper for the creditors to think about repayment. By giving they have shown their power, the question of repayment is the concern of the family of the deceased recipient.

Very rarely does it happen that the donor of a potlatch fails to return his investment presents except through oversight. In spite of every precaution, errors occur, and these are said to be caused by a supernatural being, Its-of invisible, rising between the donor and his guest, hiding the latter, or by Snetqwalnekaista stealing away his thoughts. Unless the donor wishes to insult a guest, the donor will give him presents later on, and that ends the matter. But if he does not do so, the slighted man may decide to return the insult, and thus feuds are often generated that may lead to war between tribes. About sixty years ago, a war between the people of Bella Bella and Rivers Inlet was caused in that way. Recently, in the autumn of 1921, a Bella Coola chief insisted on dancing at a Bella Bella potlatch, although it was commonly known he did not have the necessary goods for distribution to validate his dance. The hosts waxed sarcastic, taunts were answered by taunts, and only the presence of some white men prevented bloodshed. Relations between the two tribes are still strained as a result of this incident. The Bella Coola chief was

~~will represent a present from a tel io chief, a solid piece of alder stem, a loca~~ s

subjects to spells of insanity, and it was during one of these that he danced. According to my informant, the Bella Bella should have taken this into account, along with the man's generosity on previous occasions, and overlooked his remissness.

Cases have been known of a "stupid" man endeavouring to increase his prestige by giving frequent potlatches when unable to pay his debts. Such an one is laughed at for his stinginess, not the attribute of a chief; and his fellows show their disapproval by giving him only small presents.

It must be clearly understood that debts publicly incurred, in other words investment presents received at any ceremony, must be publicly returned, if the debtor is to receive the public esteem granted to one who pays back with interest. But it is obviously impossible for everyone to give a potlatch; hence any young man desirous of returning his obligations, and thus rising in public favour, can do so at a potlatch given by somebody else. Guests are present from abroad, so that the knowledge of his discharge of indebtedness is circulated further afield than if he had done so at a local gathering, while the donor has the additional satisfaction of being able to give to these strangers. Sometimes as many as ten young men will ask X. for permission to pay their debts at his potlatch. Such is never refused, because it means more ceremonial, and greater interest, which, indirectly increase X.'s prestige. A young man who has been taken to a foreign potlatch as an adherent of a guest always receives presents, and if he repays these with interest his name begins to become known, especially as his return payments are unexpected. It is thus that a man whose chiefly name, or names, has been dormant for generations can begin to restore it. Thanks to presents he gives at X.'s potlatch, he will in return receive large gifts, until finally he is able to give

give a potlatch himself. It is after X. has paid up his own indebtedness that the debts of others are settled. In each case the speaker announces the amount received on such and such an occasion and the amount returned. Thus all present are able to estimate the generosity of the payer, a chiefly attribute. When a young man plans to give his first potlatch it is customary for the older chiefs of his village to give their advice, as to whether or not he has sufficient goods, though this is merely counsel; every man is understood to be master of his own affairs.

After paying his debts X. can estimate with a fair degree of accuracy the amount of goods remaining. He still has many heavy expenses in connection with the sisaok initiates, and the young people for whom he is obtaining seats. Goods for these purposes have been put on one side, and the remainder he now proceeds to give away as investment presents. His exhibition of ancestral prerogatives, and the guise in which his ancestors are now living, i.e. as eagle, raven, whale or such like, have been duly validated by the presents given on the preceding evening, while his social status has been properly cared for by the payments to his craftsmen and other creditors. Thus investments presents are not really essential, though a man always endeavours to give them, both for economic and social reasons. There are no definite laws regarding their distribution. X. is guided in his choice of recipients by the following considerations (1) :—

1. If he knows that a certain chief is likely to give a potlatch in the near future it will be to his advantage to give him a present, knowing that it will be returned with interest.

2. He will desire to give something to a chief from whom he has often received favours.

(1) Only one present is given to each man, irrespective of the number of names he may have. The Kwakiutl are said to give a present for each name

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3. He will wish to ingratiate himself with a powerful chief by presents.

4. He will wish to give presents to a chief with whom he is not on friendly terms. Unless the latter reciprocates, it will be considered that X. has shown his superiority.

5. Usually an important chief will receive more valuable presents than one of lesser rank. This custom is not governed by any fixed code, and an important chief may be deliberately slighted, if X. thinks that he has not shown him, X., sufficient respect. It is considered the height of folly to give presents without due regard to their return. ~~in kind. The~~

The amount of gifts depends entirely on the wealth and will of X. If he wishes to increase his fame he will endeavour to give valuable presents, but if he gives none at all, it is entirely his own affair. It is a deep disgrace to any man to be unable to return these presents. Nothing is said, nor does the donor take active steps to receive his returns, but the influence of the recipient perceptibly wanes. It is expected that a heavier rate of interest will be paid on presents received many years in advance of repayment, but again this is a matter of individual volition. The debts of a man who dies ~~whether~~ for goods received at potlatches are scrupulously discharged by his family. If they fail to do so, their own influence would be lessened.

There is one method of reducing the value of an investment present, which is used by a man who feels unable to repay a large gift. On a certain occasion the uncle of my informant was guest at a Kinsquit potlatch, where he received, as an investment present, a fine large canoe and two hundred blankets. Not wishing to incur so large a liability he at once returned fifty of the blankets

to his host for distribution among the guests. This action tended to lower his prestige, since it acknowledged his inability or unwillingness to repay his present. The chief in question, being firmly established in his chiefly status, did not fear to do this, though one of lesser rank would have hesitated to confess his inferiority.

It is on the value of the goods distributed in these three types of presentation; namely, recompense for work done, repayment of debts, and investment presents, that the importance of the potlatch, and consequently of X himself, is virtually judged. These are for the potlatch as a whole, including the return of the dead and the intangible prestige of X; the donations which follow are to validate specific transactions which may be omitted. The sequence of rites is usually according to the order here given, although powerful chiefs in many cases alter it. In one or two families the whole course of the potlatch is changed, since the members have the prerogative of distributing their presents without the house. In such a case the giving is done during the day instead of at night. ~~The writer failed~~ It was impossible to obtain details of this ritual, which is said to have come as a prerogative obtained through marriage with a Kwakiutl woman.

After the distribution of investment presents comes the strengthening of X's seat.

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The wife, aided by members of her family, have placed the necessary goods in readiness, though it is pretended they merely happen to have them in hand. Three old ladies are sitting near the door, and another behind the fire. Beside the latter stands a chief, attired in a ~~s~~scarf head-dress, who represents Y. The speaker calls on the substitute to come forward, as if he were just returning to the house, and shouts,

"There is no place for him to sit!" Then he turns to Y.'s wife, crying, "Go if you have not a few trifles in your room to strengthen him."

The word for "attraction" is ~~ukwetuka~~, or ukutuliza, which means, "clothing up", as if X. were clothing an idle chief-like base. The words have the other significance of "clothing". They represent the ethereal dignity wherewith a chief is clothed.

Y.'s wife goes to her room, or to the place in the ~~house~~ house where the goods are stored, and brings forth a large assortment of valuables, which are still in a ~~bundle~~ sack. The substitute who is representing ~~the father~~ of X. then places himself in the latter's seat, with ~~his back~~ in the back made more solid by

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these goods. X.'s wife may tell the announcer that they have still more goods for him, and in that case the speaker calls out:—

"His seat is too hard. Have you no soft clothes for it ?"

The wife brings forward more goods to make her husband's seat more comfortable. The announcer, who has been chosen for his fluency, uses his originality in what he calls for from the wife, soft cloths for the seat is merely a symple. Sometimes many presents are given; at other times, if the wife and her family be poor these are few and of little worth. It is not essential that foreign guests witness this establishment or strengthening of a seat, though a man prefers their presence as it means that his fame is spread beyond the immediate vicinity of his village. These goods are then distributed among the guests, and are not returnable, as they are said to have"become nothing "for X.'s seat. He may contribute heavily himself in the giving of these presents. ~~at this juncture.~~

The next event is the strengthening, or initial establishment, of seats for some of X.'s ~~In addition to the s sack name which each initiate has received~~ younger relatives, often including those concealed, within the back room. ~~annealment in the back room, X. may also~~ ~~in a seat of the house, or to strengthen the seats they may already possess.~~ It is not necessary for him to do this, nor need he do so for all, unless he so desires. The parents of the youths have been consulted as to the ancestral name which each is to receive, embodied in ~~that of a forefather, who possesses a soul~~ an ancestral myth. The importance of the name in that case is intrinsically great, but for the owner to attain to a position of importance worthy of the name will require the distribution of large quantities of goods on many occasions. The Lelia Coola regard the history of names as a series of curves. Theoretically, a name may be of the highest order, but it will be forfeited to the last unless its owner

On the other hand,

in a seat some young man whom he has not initiated into the ranks of [illegible]. The two actions are distinct, though closely related.

X nicks out a place at the side of the house for one of the initiates, to Y, whether or not he is within the back-room. This representative receives no social or pecuniary advantage from his position. He stands near the door until a herald calls upon him to enter, as if he had newly come into the house. He is summoned by the [illegible] name recently announced for Y. After consultation with X, the herald calls out that henceforth Y's name is so-and-so, giving an ancestral one dormant in Y's family, and that his seat is where he is now sitting. The family of Y contribute to the strengthening of his seat, in fact X himself may not provide any portion of the goods expended. A fluent chief, prompted by some member of Y's family, gives the name is featured, and concludes with a polite speech expressing that Y may rise to the fame of the first holder of the name.

Then one of the heralds calls out, "Y's seat is too hard!"

Someone, Y's father, mother, or other relative, X, or his wife, bri[illegible]

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forward goods to soften his seat.

"Y.'s neck is unsupported," cries another of the heralds.

More goods are brought forth. In like fashion all kinds of things are bestowed:— a cotton, "to support Y.'s back"; a mouse-skin, "to shield him from the fire;two gloves, "to make him strong and heavy as he moves about the earth"; a pile of blankets, "to provide a cave to keep him warm"; more goods, "to give him shoes"; more cloth, "to wipe his mouth after eating"; and other things to provide him with hat, trousers and so on. The family of Y. keep ~~on~~ telling the heralds that they have more goods, so that he may continue his ~~to~~ ~~ing~~ about Y.'s needs.

As soon as all the available goods have been piled up they are given to the guests, who are witnesses of the validification of the name and seat in the house. Theoretically, the value of the present received by each has no bearing on the rank of the recipient. X. decides whether ~~or not~~ each guest shall receive a present of like value, or whether a man shall receive more than a woman. Owing to the difficulty of accurate estimation of the amount required, there is often a residue, which is given away to the more important chiefs. These goods are strictly not returnable. They are spoken of as having "become nothing", with reference to the name and seat in question.

Exactly the same procedure is carried out for every young person whom X. wishes to start or to validate in his seat. Parents take advantage of a potlatch to "strengthen" their children in this way, and X. never refuses a request for ventilation. It is always announced whose boys come the goods for distri-

SECTION I.

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-tion ~~have x-ne~~, so that X. receives no direct increase of fame, if they have been provided solely by the relatives of the youth, but, indirectly, his prestige is increased through the transaction having taken place at his potlatch.

It is at this time too that other names are validated. There will be usually a number of infants whose parents wish them to receive their first child- ~~name~~ names, such as are incorporated in the family myths. Likewise, men may be be confirmed in their occupations, ~~such~~ as warriors, singers, or other professions, ~~with~~ which success, according to the ~~this man~~ Bella Coola, depends upon ~~the skill of the individual~~ the goods expended in their establishment.(1)

Throughout all this ceremonial the initiates have been carefully concealed in the back-room. They are now eagerly, though with trepidation, awaiting their time to dance. The order of appearance is a matter of no importance. It is arranged by the singers, who pass in word to one of the initiates and then begin to beat out one of his songs. He emerges, clad in a ceremonial blanket, wearing a ~~s~~ *sisaok* head-dress, and holding a rattle in his hand. Taking up his station behind the fire he dances in time to the beating of sticks. As he does so, the speaker calls upon X.'s wife to bring forward ~~such~~ goods as "cedar-bark mats for him to stand upon," or "cedar-bark mats to make soft his seat." These are piled at some convenient spot. After dancing, the initiate retires to the back-room, accompanied by one of the older members of the *sisaok* society, perhaps a *siki*. This man presently emerges, saying,

"It is most peculiar. An eagle is there now."(2)

(1) See Page

(2) Or whatever may have been the guise in which the *totemic* came to him, in itself dependent on his ancestral story.

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It the rear there a whistle sounds from the back-room, in imitation of the cream of an eagle.

There ensues a constant interplay of remark between the heralds and those regulating the singing. One of the former may call out:

"Let us see it."

The elder returns to the back-room, saying, "I will bring it out."

There now emerges a figure masked to represent an eagle, or whatever bird or animal it may be, with a long blanket covering all but the feet. Any clever singer is employed to wear this disguise, neither the initiate himself. The "eagle" bends down beside the singers as if whispering a song to them, though in reality they have long since committed the song to which it is pretended is now brought to them. ~~memorized it. One apparently~~ ~~and have recently practised it~~. They sing this to the masked figure moving around the fire, imitating the gait of an eagle, ~~He bends his head down, then raises it with a jerk, as a bird does, and hops a few steps, then lowers his head again, shakes himself, as he proceeds around the central fire.~~ With considerable dramatic skill. Meanwhile an assistant blows a whistle, sounding like an eagle. ~~Considerable dramatic ability is shown in the representation.~~ When the figure has disappeared into the back-room, the heralds discuss with one another in a loud tone of voice how that was the form in which the initiate's ancestor appeared long ago.

The announcer then calls on X. to bring forward goods, "to shield our eyes from the supernatural being." These things, part of which may have been provided by relatives of the initiate, are piled beside those brought forward by X.'s wife, which may also have come from the same source.

The singers strike up the second song of the initiate; again he appears

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The End

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and dances to it, then vanishes into the rear room.

The two assortments of goods are now distributed. First, those provided by X. are given out. They are presented to the singers who composed the songs for the initiates, to the carpenters who made the masks, the heralds, and announcers and any others who have assisted ~~in the rites~~. If any goods should remain, they are presented to the stranger-guests. Then the goods which are "mats for the dancer's feet" are likewise distributed, but they go entirely to the guests, and are said to have "become nothing" or to have "flowed away" in the transaction. Neither set of goods is returnable. It is these presents which validate, in the eyes of the guests, the right of membership of the initiate in the secret society.

When a second, third or fourth initiate is called out, one at a time, and with each the same procedure is repeated. In distributing the goods, efforts are made to remember those guests who received nothing at the first distribution.

It is seldom possible to have all the initiates dance on the same evening, though it is done when it can be arranged. Towards dawn, one of the important chiefs, it is immaterial which one, calls out, "I want a siki."

It is understood that for this part of the ceremony a foreign expert is required, and one such comes forward. Who shall officiate is a matter which has been previously arranged. He retires to the back-room and returns, clad in his ceremonial costume, including a long cape with pockets. With him come the four or five young men who have just finished dancing. The singers beat time furiously with their sticks, and the siki whirls round and round, working himself up into a frenzy, with twists and gyrations. Gradually, he approaches one of the initiates, and pretends to pluck something from within him. As he opens his hands

Chapter I

Chapter II Enter – The Heroine

Chapter III On the Niagara Frontier

Chapter IV Brother and Sister

The Red Coat

A Tale of Two Rivers

(Detroit & Niagara 1812–14)

for

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by J. N. McIlwraith

Author of

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Food is distributed and the people disperse.

The employment of a foreign expert to expel the power from the initiates is necessary since the prerogative of siki is not native to Bella Coola. Formerly this was done in the back-room without any elaborate ceremony. This rite marks the admission of the initiates into the s/saok society, although they cannot yet leave the back-room.

It is somewhat difficult to understand the attitude of those watching either

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the masked dancer or a representation of the deceased. Usually, the feet are plainly visible, and the spectators cannot fail to realize they are looking, ~~at a man~~ at another supernatural creature, but at a man, not an effigy, ~~for instance.~~ Yet none dream of voicing this doubt. It must be remembered that all are steeped in the atmosphere of the supernatural, and also in the belief of the close relationship existing between supernatural beings and members of the sisaók society. To the uninitiated this is proven by the supernatural whistling. They ~~come to~~ regard the figures as ~~images with~~ supernaturally endowed representations of those beings with whom the participants are able to come in contact. An educated Indian likened their attitude to that of members of the Roman Catholic church who pray before images of the saints, fully realizing that these are only inanimate statues, yet mentally experiencing a feeling of close contact with the saints themselves. Another Indian expressed it thus:--

"The uninitiated are trained to believe what they see. It would be most improper for them to voice any doubts, in fact they do not have any, so firm is their belief in the supernatural power of the members of the sisaók society."

This last appears to be the real explanation. Everyone must have his or her doubts, but each is afraid to express them, realizing that so doing would not only offend the chiefs, as individuals, but the supernatural powers with whom they are in touch, which is obvious from the supernatural whistling that accompanies the ceremony. It appears that the uninitiated have no idea how this is produced.

~~On the following night, more initiates~~ ~~come in the manner described~~.

Concluding Ceremonies and Observations.

The number of sɛsaok initiates is usually too great to allow all to dance on one night. If possible, this is done, but if not, on the following night more of the initiates perform in the manner already described. The distribution of presents and the cleansing of the young sɛsaok also follows the same lines. If ~~very~~ many of them are secluded, three, or even four, nights may be required until the last one has danced, and the last cleansing performed.

There now remains only the necessity of removing from the house itself the supernatural power with which it is firmly believed to have been impregnated throughout ~~the whole~~ of the ceremony, ~~of so many weeks~~. Should this not be done, it would be so strong that only sɛsaok could thenceforth live in the house, and no kusiut rite could ever be performed in it. One of the senior chiefs, acting on X.'s behalf, requests as many siki as are present to go to the back-room. At the same time the singer, or singers, with a drum, or drums, beats it, or them, slowly. The siki call out loudly, in unison, "hoip" four times. The whistles sound from the back-room with ever lessening intensity, as if the supernatural being, whose voice they are, were going away. It is said that this practice has been comparatively recently adopted from Rivers Inlet; there used to be noting of the kind. The siki re-emerge, and one of them stands behind the fire with his stick which he beats on the floor and calls on the audience to shout with him, "hi'''". This is done four times. It serves to purify the house from the supernatural power with which it has been ~~impregnated~~ saturated. The people then disperse, without food.

Goods from the general store are reserved to pay these men for their services, and also for cleansing the initiates from the powers with which they have been imbued, a rite that takes place the following morning in the presence of several siki alone.

The initiates are brought from the back-room and seated in a close

circle between the door and the fire (behind the fire, according to some informants). A foreign siki is chosen by X to perform the cleansing rite. He has been asked beforehand, and has come provided with a long pole and some soiled clothing. It is immaterial whose this is, provided that it has been in contact with a human body. The most potent articles are catamenial cedar-bark pads.

with a long pole and some soiled clothing. It is immaterial whose clothing it is so long as it has been in contact with a human body, but the most potent articles are cedar pads which have been used by women during their monthly periods. The siki covers the lads with a large cedar bark mat. Then he fastens the cloting or pads to his pole and holds the end in the fire until they are smouldering. Then he swings it four times over the heads of the initiates and throws the sticks with the objects back on the fire. Sometimes four sets of clothes are used. This rite, which is regarded as very important, frees the lads from the supernatural powers with which they have been endowed and finally permits them to leave the back-room and return to normal life, just as their earlier learning freed them from the tutelage. During their period of seclusion no initiate can perform a kusiut ceremony of any kind. The supernatural beings of the two societies, though closely akin, are yet independent, and it would be unthinkable for a man to enter into contact with the two at the same time, unless he should be the owner of a rare prerogative enabling him to do so. A few men have the right, which undoubtedly was derived either from the Bella Bella or the people of Rivers Inlet.

X. pays the functioning siki with new clothing. This completes the whole ceremony. The guests either return home or adjourn to some other house where a potlatch is taking place, but no rites mark their departure.

Such then are the principal features of the Bella Coola potlatch. Without making a careful comparison of its features with those of neighbouring tribes, the following points stand out with great clearness:--

1. The basic concepts of the potlatch in Bella Coola are the same as those of the rite practised elsewhere on the coast.

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2 The potlatch has not the same importance at Bella Coola as it has on other parts of the coast, especially among the Kwakiutł. This is recognized by the Bella Coola themselves. My informants stated repeatedly that they did not carry their potlatches to the same lengths as did the "foolish" Kwakiutł, nor were they as keen financiers. A Bella Coola would never entirely impoverish himself by lavish giving.

3. The potlatch, though fundamentally the same as it is elsewhere on the coast, has certain rites characteristic of the locality. The central Bella Coola ~~feature of the return of an~~ ancestor, has not been reported from other parts of the coast. It would be very interesting to be able to trace the history of this. The most probable conjecture, and it is impossible to make more than a conjecture, is that it is a rite which the Bella Coola themselves have evolved through their religious nature, and have merely incorporated into the potlatch concept. On the other hand, it may be ~~in any case~~ that the return of the dead is an old feature, decayed in other tribes through the ever increasing economic ~~features~~ aspects of the potlatch, which are of less import in Bella Coola. Whether or not Mɛ̈tlakila is a pure Bella Coola concept is questionable. He may be ~~merely~~ an altered form of a supernatural being found among other coastal tribes.

4. The potlatch ~~idea of~~ the necessity ~~for~~ distributing presents to validate ~~a~~ every transaction ~~and that a man's status depended on this, and to establish or to establish the standing of a man~~ is an old custom. Not only does the whole trend of Bella Coola thought support this view, it is to be expected from the prevalence of ~~this~~ the same concept among other coastal tribes.